

FACTS



Ministry
of the
Environment

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ABOUT ACIDIC PRECIPITATION MUSKOKA AND HALIBURTON

AUGUST, 1985



The regions of Muskoka and Haliburton are key territories in the fight against acid rain. Much of the evidence used by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment in its case for international action has been developed by Ministry and university scientists in and around the lakes in these areas.

Furthermore, within the regions, community concern and action are co-ordinated by the Region of Muskoka's Acid Rain Committee, by the Haliburton Pollution Control Committee, by the Muskoka Lakes Cottagers Association Movement Against Acid Rain and by other concerned groups and individuals.

This fact sheet provides a regional perspective on the issue.

Background

One of the most pressing environmental problems facing large areas of North America is acidic precipitation. All of southern Ontario receives a steady bombardment of acids, acid forming gases and associated pollutants. The acids come down with rain, snow, fog, and small particles in the air.

The large majority of these acids are due to human activities. Smelters and coal-fired electric generating stations both in Canada and the United States spew millions of tons of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere annually. Cars, trucks, and trains contribute more millions of tons of nitrogen oxides. These gases react with sunlight, oxygen, ozone, water and other gases to form sulphuric and nitric acids -- strong, corrosive, mineral acids.

In unpolluted areas, rain and snow are naturally slightly acidic since carbon dioxide is a natural component of the atmosphere, and dissolves in water to form weak carbonic acid. Water quality of lakes has developed in response to weathering processes induced by this weak acid. Rocks and minerals react with carbonic acid to form bicarbonate, which is found in natural waters everywhere.

Similarly, the complex biological communities in lakes, streams and forests have adapted and evolved in equilibrium with these natural conditions and processes. However, acid rain has seriously disturbed this equilibrium.

Levels of Acidity

The acidity of a solution is measured on a pH scale. The pH scale is termed logarithmic. This means that a change of one unit on the pH scale corresponds to a tenfold increase or decrease in acidity. Thus, a solution with a pH of 4 is ten times more acidic than a solution of pH 5, and one hundred times more acidic than a solution with a pH of 6.

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Distilled water is considered to be neither acidic or alkaline, and has a pH of 7. The carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will cause rain to have a pH of about 5.6 if no other factors are affecting the pH.

Rainfall with a pH less than 5.6 is termed "acid rain", but significant amounts of acid are also deposited as gases and particles through processes called "dry deposition". Current measurements of acids in rain or snow represent only about half of the total amount of acid falling on southern Ontario.

In the Muskoka-Haliburton area of Ontario, the average pH of precipitation is less than 4.2, which is 25 times more acidic than normal. Often, individual rain or snow storms have a much lower pH.

The pH of rain and snow events at Dorset are reported weekly, to newspapers throughout Eastern Canada along with an analysis of where the air mass associated with the precipitation had travelled prior to reaching Muskoka. For example, on February 5th and 10th of 1984, snowfalls with pH readings of 3.7 and 3.4 fell in the Dorset area. In both cases, the air associated with these snowfalls passed over the United States midwest prior to travelling into Ontario. An analysis of rain and snow events in 1980 and 1981 concluded that air masses coming from the south and southwest brought 61 per cent of Dorset's total loadings of acid and sulphate, and 63 per cent of the nitrate. Rain or snow associated with air that has travelled to Ontario from the north or northwest usually has lower acidity.

Survey of Lakes

Most lakes have the ability to neutralize a certain amount of acid. This neutralizing capacity of a lake is measured by the level of bicarbonate alkalinity in the water. If a lake has a high alkalinity level, it can resist pH changes caused by acid inputs. Lakes with low alkalinities can experience pH depressions during spring snowmelt or after heavy rains, times when large acid loads enter the lakes.

A lake with zero or less alkalinity is an acid lake. A negative reading of alkalinity means that the lake contains mineral acidity. These lakes usually have a pH less than 5, and if they have any fish at all, it will be a hardy, acid-tolerant species like yellow perch. Bass and trout species will probably not reproduce, although some adult fish may still survive until they die of old age or other causes.

The neutralizing capacity of a lake is dependent on a number of factors. Lakes in limestone regions usually have a very high alkalinity, since bicarbonate alkalinity results as limestone slowly dissolves. Alkalinity can also be generated in soils, so that groundwater and soil runoff inputs to some lakes can be an important supply of neutralizing capacity.

The Muskoka-Haliburton area is almost entirely on the Canadian Shield. This region is underlain by granite, and has many exposed rock outcrops. Granite is very insoluble and can supply little alkalinity. The soils are usually shallow and sandy or acidic. These acidic soils are not the result of acid deposition, but are formed by the decomposition of organic material such as forest litter. However, these naturally acidic soils contribute very little neutralizing capacity to lakes, so that most lakes in Muskoka-Haliburton have low alkalinity levels.

The Ministry of the Environment in cooperation with the Ministry of Natural Resources conducts lake surveys to determine the sensitivity of these lakes to acidic precipitation. This program is continuing with 5,341 lakes sampled province-wide to date. Of these, 654 are in the Muskoka and Haliburton counties. Lakes are classified by their alkalinity level, and the percentage of lakes in each category is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of 654 Muskoka-Haliburton Lakes
in Alkalinity Classes

<u>Acidified</u>	<u>Extreme Sensitivity</u>	<u>Moderate Sensitivity</u>	<u>Low Sensitivity</u>	<u>No Sensitivity</u>
2.3%	33.8%	48.9%	8.1%	6.9%

Most of the lakes classified in the low and no sensitivity categories are located in southern Haliburton county, where the limestone outcrops and calcium-rich deposits contribute alkalinity to these lakes. The vast majority of the other lakes have low alkalinity, and therefore, could become acidified if acidic precipitation continues for an extended period of time.

The results of this survey of Ontario Lakes are published yearly, and include the name and alkalinity classification for individual lakes. A copy of this listing can be obtained from the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Communications Branch.

Effects on Fish

It is not simply high acid levels that cause fish death in acid lakes and streams. One well-known property of acids is their ability to dissolve metals. This occurs on a large scale in areas subjected to acidic deposition. Metals such as calcium and magnesium are leached out of soils by acid rain. This removes essential plant nutrients from the watershed. As far as fish are concerned, leaching of aluminum from soils and rocks is far more important.

Granite contains large amounts of aluminum. As the pH of water that contacts granite falls below 5.5, it dissolves the aluminum in increasing amounts. This combination of high aluminum and high acidity is more lethal to fish than high acid levels alone.

Much of the research in Ontario on the effects of acid rain is conducted at the Ministry of the Environment's Dorset Field Research Centre. One study examines the toxicity of acid and aluminum combinations on different life stages of various fish species.

In both laboratory and field experiments, eggs and fish fry of several species of sport fish have been tested. In general, fish eggs are quite tolerant of high acid and aluminum levels. Once the fry emerge from the eggs, however, they are very sensitive. In some streams near Dorset, 100% mortality in exposed fish fry can be observed during spring snowmelt.

For example, one of the intensively studied lakes near Dorset is a small headwater lake, called Plastic Lake. On more than one occasion, fish kills have been noted in this lake which coincide with spring snowmelt. An inlet stream to Plastic Lake is one site where a number of fish species have been exposed. During a series of experiments in March, April, and May of 1983, rainbow trout fry and yearlings experienced 100 per cent mortality when exposed to the water of this inlet stream. Slightly more acid tolerant lake trout fry had mortality rates ranging from 47-100 per cent, while brook trout fry had anywhere from 0 to 100 per cent mortality, depending on the date of exposure.

Acids accumulate all winter in the snow pack. When spring arrives, this acid load is released over a fairly short period of time. Even in lakes and streams that have significant neutralizing capacity throughout the rest of the year, this spring input of acid can be overwhelming. The result is a drastic drop in pH, and a pulse of high aluminum concentration. Depending on the time of the melt, this can coincide with the time of year when fish eggs are hatching. If they emerge into this lethal solution, the loss of an entire year class of fish can result.

Biologists can determine the age of fish by counting annular rings in their scales. When a survey of a fish population reveals one or more missing year classes, it is often the first clue that the lake is being acidified. If conditions deteriorate, and successful reproduction does not occur for a number of consecutive years, the population is doomed to extinction.

Effects on Other Aquatic Organisms

Fish are by no means the only inhabitants of freshwater lakes and streams. They are the top link in a complex food chain based on plants and algae, including aquatic insects, crayfish, snails, clams, and a bewildering variety of plankton species. Scientists have found that acidic deposition affects virtually all of these.

Crayfish and clams need calcium to form their hard exteriors. In acidic water, where calcium is much more soluble, they have difficulty forming their protective shells.

Aquatic insect communities are very sensitive to acidification. Mayflies disappear from streams with a pH less than 6. Other insects disappear at lower pH. Unfortunately, black flies and mosquitoes are not among them. Certain species of black fly seem to thrive at low pH, so respite from these pests cannot be hoped for from acid rain.

These sensitive indicators already say that much of the Muskoka-Haliburton environment is acid stressed. Species that should occupy streams and lakes are missing, and their place has been taken by acid tolerant species. One popular misconception is that an acid lake or stream is a dead lake or stream. Nature is versatile, and life forms can be found everywhere from volcanic vents to the arctic ice cap. Abundant life can be found in acid lakes, but it is not the kind of life we are used to. Fish, molluscs, and crayfish are gone, but mats of slimy algae can abound.

Acidic conditions can also favour some other distinctly unpleasant life. One type of microscopic algae can produce a very disagreeable "rotting cabbage" or "garbage dump" odor. This phenomenon is new: it was first recorded in Haliburton six years ago, and has been observed in several lakes in Muskoka-Haliburton as well as lakes in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. During 1984, three new cases of lake-wide odours produced by this algae were reported in Ontario. The lakes all have fairly low pH, and are in regions of high acid deposition.

Some amphibian species are also sensitive to acidic conditions. Salamanders, toads, and frogs lay their eggs in water during the spring. Some pools that they use for egg-laying are formed from melt water, and can have low pH and high aluminum levels. Research at Dorset has shown that these conditions can significantly reduce hatching success of their eggs.

Low pH Drinking Water Supplies

Low pH or high levels of acidity in a water supply can make the water quite corrosive. This means that if the water is left in contact with metal plumbing, some of the metals can be dissolved out of the pipes and solder, resulting in high concentrations of metals in drinking water. These metals (copper, zinc, aluminum and lead) can occasionally exceed health criteria for drinking water, but there is a relatively simple method for solving the problem. The elevated metal levels occur only in water which has been in contact with the plumbing for a number of hours or days. If the hot and cold water systems are flushed by turning on the taps for about one minute or so, the metals drop rapidly to acceptable levels.

In a survey of wells in the Muskoka-Haliburton area, about 12% had a pH below 6. In general, these low pH wells were quite shallow (less than 40 feet deep) and in sandy soil. A shallow well does not necessarily mean that it will have a low pH though. It should also be noted that the low pH water in these wells does not arise from acidic precipitation. Chemists have determined that the type of acid that cause low pH in groundwater is the result of natural carbonic acid (dissolved carbon dioxide).

Heavy Metal and Other Air Pollutants

While acidic precipitation has received most media attention, acid is only one component of a dilute industrial soup raining down on Muskoka-Haliburton. Volatile organics, ozone, and heavy metals are also parts of an air pollution zone covering all of southern and central Ontario.

A core of undisturbed lake sediment yields an historical record of human activities in Ontario. Presence and absence of different types of pollen can be related to the logging out of the original forests, and introduction of crops and other plants. Towards the upper layers, more sinister benchmarks of man's activities occur: a stratum of radioactive isotopes from atmospheric tests of nuclear devices, and increasing levels of toxic heavy metals.

A historical record of the pH of a lake can be determined by analysing diatom and some types of algae remains in lake sediments. Research using this method is currently being carried out at the Dorset Centre to determine the rate of acidification of lakes in Ontario.

Low pH in lakes favours the accumulation of these heavy metals in the food chain. Fish taken from low pH lakes in Muskoka-Haliburton have elevated levels of mercury, cadmium, and lead.

Other air pollutants also make their presence felt. Up to \$23 million a year may be lost in southern Ontario due to lost crop production because of ozone damage alone.

Air Pollution and Forests

Trees can die from a large number of causes. Drought, insects, fungi, diseases, root damage, road salt, and severe winters can all take their toll. Air pollution can also cause or contribute to the death of trees.

Over the past three to five years, there have been reports from central Europe and Southern Scandinavia on a widespread death and damage of forests. Similar reports from the eastern United States indicate that tree growth is being impaired over the past 20 years for unknown reasons. Many international experts believe air pollution is one of the causes of this forest decline or death.

In Ontario and Quebec, there have been reports of recent dieback of sugar maples. While tent caterpillar infestations in the late 1970's provide at least some of the explanation for this dieback, the Ministry of the Environment, in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, are undertaking a more thorough assessment of the problem. Preliminary results from this study indicate unusual numbers of dead and damaged maples in some locations.

What's Being Done

The Ontario Government began the establishment of a province-wide network of air quality monitoring instruments in 1968, and this network has been expanded over the years. The network now consists of more than 1,400 instruments which measure 30 contaminants, including SO₂, NO_x, suspended particulate matter and ozone. Under the Ministry's program of air pollution control, industry in the Province has spent more than \$1 billion for air pollution abatement. This has resulted in great improvement in the air quality of Ontario cities.

However, more recently when acidic precipitation studies demonstrated that a major share of the precursor pollutants are the result of long range transport, it was realized that airsheds can no longer be considered as an entity with localized boundaries. Since "airsheds" are common to many states and provinces in the U.S. and Canada, pollution control to protect the environment and health of people must be a shared responsibility and commitment of all parties in the common airshed.

Ontario has recognized that it is part of the problem, and must be part of the solution, and therefore has reacted positively by requiring a significant reduction in emissions from the two largest sources of SO₂ in Ontario, which account for 70% of its total emissions.

Inco Limited in Sudbury, the world's largest nickel producer, generally acknowledged to be the largest single point source of sulphur emissions in North America, has cut its sulphur dioxide emissions by about two-thirds between 1970 and 1984. Inco has met Ontario government regulations by installing increased pyrrhotite rejection equipment and sulphuric acid plants. Inco will be required to further reduce its sulphur emissions by 50 per cent or more from 1984 levels before 1994.

The Falconbridge smelter in Sudbury now removes 82 per cent of the sulphur from its ores by methods similar to those being used by Inco.

Ontario Hydro, whose combined coal-fired power plants form the second largest source of SO₂ in the province, is now under government regulation to reduce emissions by approximately 43 per cent from 1980 levels by 1990. Further reductions will be ordered. Hydro is required to meet the established emission limits regardless of any increase in domestic power demand or in export of power.

In 1984, Canada agreed to reduce, SO₂ emissions by 50 per cent by 1994. The apportionment of this reduction amongst the provinces was agreed upon by federal and provincial environment ministers in February 1985. Ontario's share constitutes 62 per cent of the total planned reduction by all the eastern Canadian provinces.

In Muskoka-Haliburton, over half of the acid deposition comes from sources in the United States. Environment Ontario has taken a vigorous role in trying to promote controls on United States sources of pollution. The Province has appeared at numerous hearings to protest relaxations in sulphur dioxide emission regulations. The scientific research carried out by the Ministries of Environment and Natural Resources has been presented at a number of conferences. The evidence of environmental degradation obtained from this research has been instrumental in convincing the American scientific community of the need for sulphur emission controls.

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